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NORTHERN BOUNDARIES OF KOREA

1. North Korea-China Boundary

No active boundary dispute exists between Communist China and North Korea at present. Some segments of the boundary could easily come into dispute because of the ambiguity of past agreements on the boundary and the nature of the terrain that the boundary traverses, but it is unlikely that any dispute will arise in the near future because the present political relationship between the two countries is amicable. Reportedly, agreements between the two countries include some problems of border control but whether these border problems are stated precisely has not been determined.

In the past, numerous controversies have arisen over the China-Korea boundary. Most of them have involved the portion of the boundary near Pai-t'ou Shan, a volcanic peak that is the highest point of the watershed between the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. The segments of the boundary that follow the main courses of these rivers have been relatively free from dispute although the precise delineation of the boundary in the rivers has not been clearly established.

One of the main reasons for misunderstandings over the Pai-t'ou Shan area is that it is almost uninhabited and until recently was largely unexplored. The first known attempt to define the border in this area was made in 1713, when the Chinese and Koreans erected a boundary monument on the watershed of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers near Pai-t'ou Shan. The inscription on the monument reads, in part, as follows:

...the Governor of Wu-la Province, Manchuria, has under imperial mandate surveyed the boundary to this point. After a close inspection of the area, we inscribe this stone on the watershed dividing the Yalu River to the west and the Tumen River to the east, marking the boundary for Manchuria and Korea.

An agreement of 1909 (when Korea was under Japanese control) between Japan and China stated that the boundary extended from the monument described above to the headwater streams of the Tumen River.

The Governments of Japan and China declare that the river Tumen is recognized as forming the boundary between China and Korea and that in the region of the source of that river the boundary line shall start from the boundary monument and thence follow the course of the stream Shihyishwei [Chinese: Shih-i-shui; Korean: Sŏgŭl-su].

The description included in the official agreements led to confusion and disagreement over which of the many streams that radiate from Pai-t'ou Shan were the true headwater streams of the Yalu and Tumen Rivers and, particularly, which one was "the stream Shihyishwei." Disagreement had arisen earlier over whether the Tumen River referred to in the agreement of 1713 was the one that flows into the Sea of Japan (the one generally accepted as the boundary river) or to another river of the same name that flows north into the Amur River system. In 1914 a survey party had great difficulty establishing a link between the boundary monument and the stream considered to be Shihyishwei. The possibility that the monument erected in 1713 might have been moved also was discussed. Currently the marker is presumed to be still in existence although recent maps indicate that disagreement as to its precise location. Chinese Communist maps show most of Pai-t'ou Shan as Chinese territory, whereas North Korean and Soviet maps show it as Korean territory.

There is a little more agreement as to the delineation of the border in the segments along the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Although the Yalu River has been accepted as the boundary for many years and the Tumen since at least 1909, the actual river boundaries apparently have not been demarcated and the river islands have not been formally allocated to one country or the other. Agreements that pertain mainly to railway administration divide jurisdiction over one bridge across the Yalu and another across the Tumen at the middle of each structure, but the middle location does not seem to apply to the boundary in the river. The following is quoted from "The Convention Relating to Railway Connections at Antung" of 2 November 1911:

For the purpose of through train service over the two railways, the center of the Yalu iron bridge shall be regarded as the dividing line between the two countries, the western portion being the Chinese [side of the] boundary and the eastern portion the Japanese.

Apparently, neither country has ever claimed the entire river, and there has been considerable cooperation between the two countries in matters of navigation, especially in the operation of the twin ports of Antung and

Sinniju. While Korea was under Japanese control, the boundary in the Yalu was generally considered to follow the Thlweg, or main channel, which would place the boundary closer to the Chinese side than to the North Korean side of the stream and would put nearly all of the islands under Korean control.

Another possible source of dispute is the Sup'ung Dam on the lower Yalu, which has provided power for large areas of both China and Korea. Jurisdiction over the dam has not been definitely established but if the precedent of the bridge cases were followed the boundary would be in the middle of the dam. This is not known to be the case, however, and there have been indications that the Koreans consider the project to be entirely within their jurisdiction. The last known border incident in this area occurred during repairs to the dam in 1948-49, when the Koreans refused all Chinese aid and proceeded to repair the entire structure. This action met with mild opposition and some harrassment by the Chinese, but the problem was apparently resolved quietly. After the dam was repaired the Chinese received larger quantities of electric power than before. Recent reports indicate that the Chinese are now receiving most, if not all, of the available electric power from Sup'ung.

Considerable friction occurred in the past over the large numbers of Koreans living in border areas inside China. The largest concentration of Koreans is in the area northeast of Pai-t'ou Shan, where they constitute about 70 per cent of the total population. The presence of Korean residents, who were among the earliest settlers in this area, was recognized and approved by the 1909 Treaty. In line with the Chinese Communist practice of granting semiautonomous government to ethnic groups that constitute majorities in certain localities, the Yen-pien Korean Autonomous Region was established in this area in 1952. In the area south of Pai-t'ou Shan the Cheng-pai Korean Autonomous Hsien was established in 1958.

2. North Korea-USSR Boundary

The boundary between North Korea and the USSR is not currently in dispute although the legal status of this boundary is very uncertain and there seems to be no international agreement relating to it. The boundary, only about 10 miles long, is generally considered to follow the main channel of the lower course of the Tumen River. Neither country has pressed claims for additional territory, probably in part because of their close political affinity and in part because the land adjacent to the river is lowlying, marshy, and generally unsuitable for habitation.

Few attempts have been made to define the status of the boundary. When the China-Russia boundary to the north was demarcated in 1861 the commissioners carrying out the task stopped their work on the left bank of the Tumen River, a considerable distance from the mouth of the river, and erected a boundary marker lettered "T". In 1886, a mixed commission was sent out to verify the position of the China-Russia boundary markers, but it did not check the Korea-Russia boundary -- mainly because the Czarist government of Russia felt it would not be correct to establish an exact border with a country that was merely semi-independent. The commission did move the boundary marker "T" about 4 miles downstream to a point about 10 miles from the mouth of the Tumen River and also proposed that an agreement be made to provide for navigation for the Chinese in the lower course of the river. A Korean-Russian agreement of 1888 provides for freedom of navigation on the lower Tumen for both countries.

In 1911 the Russian government called to the attention of Japan, which controlled Korea at that time, the fact that the boundary should be delimited. In 1914, Japan submitted a plan for the delimitation of the boundary in the river channel, but nothing was done about it.

Nothing is known of any post-World War II agreement on boundary delimitations, and the current status of the boundary reportedly remains unchanged. During the Korean Conflict a number of bridges were built over the Tumen River but most of them were destroyed. One jointly operated bridge now spans the river, but no agreements concerning the boundary on this bridge have been reported.

Map References

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